

A Reopened Ending:

John 4:1–42 and the Church’s Mission

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This sermon was presented at First Mennonite Church of Winnipeg on February 2, 2014. Reverend David Driedger here argues that the logic of colonialism remains a deeply embedded feature of Western Christian theology. Mennonites have at times been blind to this logic because we have focused on our own hardships, while neglecting the way this reasoning has been used by larger colonial forces. After identifying the logic of colonialism within John 4, Driedger here calls for the church to take on a posture of decolonialism, suggesting how we might reopen this biblical story in a way that might correct past abuses of mission.

Encountering the Logic of Colonialism

In preparation for sermons, I will sometimes search an academic database for relevant articles commenting on a given passage. Many times there are just a handful of papers, usually written by keen scholars pursuing some sort of historical accuracy or theological insight, many just plodding along with some sense of there being a “truth” to discover in Scripture.

However, when I searched the databases for commentary on John 4, I unexpectedly found a flourish of articles from a diverse range of scholars addressing many different issues related to the text. There were writers from North and South America, Europe, Africa, and India dealing with topics of mission, history, art, politics, gender, sociology, and philosophy. It is not uncommon to have a range of engagements with a biblical text, but these search results were so striking that it made me pause. Something significant is happening in this text. Up until chapter 4, John definitely made some grand claims, but these claims were made *within* the local Jewish context — this was a Jewish conversation.

Jesus crosses significant boundaries in John 4, including cultural, geographical, gender, and religious. We read in this chapter an early account of Christian mission. The typical reading of Jesus’s encounter with the woman at

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the well is one in which Jesus is portrayed as connecting with an outcast and marginal individual, offering her hope and acceptance. But, as I hope to explore here, the goodness of such an act may only be apparent within a certain logic.

This logic can take on many forms — in situations where there is a real sense or belief that what is being offered is good, right, and charitable. It might unfold in the story of a male professor providing sensitive encouragement to a young female grad student. It might be witnessed in an agricultural corporation selling their patented seeds to struggling rural areas in India. It is present in a Western military campaign bringing some version of democratic and economic structures to indigenous communities or Middle Eastern countries. It could be a religious leader or family member promising release from homosexual orientation. As good as these intentions might be, most of us have seen or experienced this logic as inappropriate or even damaging.

This logic is identified in many expressions of colonialism. ‘Colonialism’ commonly refers to how nations and groups have somehow occupied and controlled other nations or groups. The term comes from the European expansion of colonies beginning around the 15th century. The basic practice of conquering and controlling populations, however, is of course much older in the rise and fall of past empires.

Reading the Bible for Decolonization

In a troubling commentary on John 4, Musa Dube explores the relationship of the Bible to the European project of colonial expansion. She begins by quoting a well-known African saying, “When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, ‘let us pray.’ After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible.”²

And so the history of Western Christian expansion unfolded within expressions of missionary zeal, economic and political aspirations, and conviction of theological superiority. With this history looming large and real in her homeland of Botswana, Dube addresses John 4, beginning with the larger context of the book itself. As is commonly accepted, it seems John was written later than the other Gospels and reflects the theology of a particular Christian Jewish community in which the book is believed to have been developed. One of the main features of this community is the tension they experienced within the synagogue and with other Jews. Through this Gospel there are indications of how volatile and divisive this tension was with many of the Christian Jews apparently being kicked out. Dube believes that this explains why the commu-

2 Musa Dube, “Reading for De-colonization (John 4:1-42),” *Semeia* 75 (1996): 37–59.

nity that shaped John's Gospel would have wanted to emphasize and forge a new alliance with the Samaritans.³ As a marginal people themselves, Christian Jews were looking to shore up support and strength, even if it meant reaching out to Samaritans, who were generally considered "half-breeds", bastards essentially, by many Jews. New enemies can make friends of old enemies. And all these local politics are set within the larger setting of Roman rule and the need to consolidate as much support as possible.

Rather than joining the Pharisaic Jews or submitting fully to Roman rule, Christian Jews seem to construct their own colonial project. They claimed themselves as the ones expanding their kingdom, though surely they are doing it with good intentions. They are the ones doing it right? But this is where things get difficult. As I mentioned earlier nearly every expression that *ends* with control or domination *began* with a sense of benevolence, a belief that something good was being offered. It is no different in John 4.

Jesus is portrayed as superior — he comes with special access to *living water*. Jesus plays on the woman's ignorance and perhaps even gender imbalance, telling her that she worships what she does not know, while Jesus, a Jew, possesses the true knowledge of salvation. What Jesus appeals to is abstract — the spirit of truth, something that is greater than her particular tradition, which is limited and insufficient. Jesus is constructing a notion of truth that can undermine and absorb any competing expression.

When the disciples return, Jesus tells them about their commissioning; their being sent out into the mission field which is ripe for the picking. Jesus says, "I have sent you to reap that for which you did not labor." How would an indigenous community hear that after experiences with Western expansion? They are passive fields just waiting to be cut down, presumably for the profit of salvation. *Now we have the Bible and they have the land.*

Finally after hearing the words of the woman, the men of Samaria come out and affirm their allegiance to Jesus. They proclaim, discarding the woman's authority and affirming theirs, that Jesus "is truly the Savior of the world." This statement, "savior of the world," is a clear reference to Roman emperors.⁴ Jesus is commander and chief of a rival nation and the Samaritans are aligning themselves with him. This reading of John 4 remains foreign to the majority interpretation of this text, but the history of the church's mission in the West demands that we consider this unsettling interpretation seriously.

3 Ibid., 47.

4 Wes Howard-Brook, *Becoming Children of God: John's Gospel and Radical Discipleship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 113.

But it's Different with Jesus, Right?

But surely the image of Jesus in John 4 is different than earlier images of power imbalances that I began with. Jesus *is actually good*, right? Aren't there many positive stories that have come out of the church's mission in the world? Couldn't this passage be read in a better light? As a church we should not avoid the topic of colonial logic just because we can point to some positive examples of mission. We live with all the consequences of the Christian West's mission to the world that remains entangled in theological and political factors. Within this history, as Mennonites, we have emphasized our hardships but less often do we recall the roles we have played in colonizing land in the Ukraine and Paraguay, as well as here in Canada, and for the benefit of larger powers trying to stabilize their claims. There is no neutral position on these matters. Even if we reject how the church has engaged in mission, we must acknowledge the effects of the past and face the realities of the present.

As I mentioned earlier, Samaritans were considered something like "half-breeds" because they were once the northern tribes of Israel but were invaded and colonized by Assyria. They were no longer pure in the eyes of some of the Jews of Judea. But just as Jesus reopened this once closed story between Jews and Samaritans by walking through Samaria, we also will need to reopen this story found in John 4. We need to consider how this scenario might have played out differently.

A Reopened Ending: Learning the Stories that Bring Life

More important than following the particular "steps" taken by Jesus in this text, we should rather look at the act of reopening closed stories. In the case of the Samaritans, their story was of a people cut off from healing and restoration with their ancestors, the Jews. In this way, John 4 can be read as an account of reopening a story of rejection and condemnation. This reading calls us to be critical of and address how colonial logic can be found in the Bible (even in the Gospels) while still acknowledging the act of reopening closed boundaries based on prejudice and discrimination. From this perspective, it is interesting to place John 4 in the light of other significant biblical and historical events; to see within and beyond the biblical accounts of reopening once closed stories.

- The creation story of Genesis 1 reopened the violent endings of other creation stories in the ancient Near East. As the people struggled with exile in Babylon and were immersed in their creation myth that spoke only of violent competition, the Israelites reopened the story and spoke of the peace that is promised by their God.

- The book of Job reopened the fears people had that disaster meant they angered God. When Job's friends tried to convince him through their orthodox positions of guilt and punishment, Job reopened the conversation, challenging us to call God to account and find how to face God in the midst of our struggles.
- In our generation civil rights leaders and activists reopened the closed story of racism and sexism, demanding that we see how deeply we have cut off certain people and groups.
- Indigenous communities reopened the closed story told to them by Western Christians, a story which too-often declared their bodies and beliefs as inferior to the gospel. Indigenous communities in the West have reopened that story by recovering their traditions and values alongside and outside the church's story.
- The gay community reopened the relationship between faithfulness and love. Being consistently denied a part in the church's story of marriage, this community is forming its own visions of how to love well.

Jesus reopened the closed story between Jews and Samaritans. Where do you find yourself today in relation to the stories of success, health, acceptance, and hope? What are the family and neighborhood stories you bring with you in your journey? What are the stories our church and countries tell? We cannot change all these stories but our mission can be to look for openings; openings to discard and escape the stories that bind life; openings to enter the spaces that bring life. May the God of Spirit and Truth guide us in these ways.

Amen.